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THE *METIS*, OR HALF-BREEDS, OF BRAZIL

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AS the narrow limits within which I must confine myself do not allow me to write as lengthy a paper as my subject requires, I shall give only a short account, without much development, dealing with the essential and really important aspects of the question. From the anthropological and social point of view, the question of the *metis* has an exceptional importance in Brazil; chiefly because the proportion of *metis* in its mixed population is very high, and these products of the intercourse of the negro and the white are largely represented in social and political life.

In order that we may, a little later, establish certain conclusions in regard to the future of the *metis* of Brazil, we must begin by settling an anthropological question which many regard as still unsettled. It is the question whether we are to conceive the whites and the blacks as two races or two species. Polygenists, basing their opinion on the difference in physical characters between the white and the black, which they regard as deeper than the differences that separate many species in the animal world, consider them to be two species of the genus *Homo.* Those who reason thus, however, forget that there is the same difference in physical characters between various races of the same animal species; for instance, in the species of *Canis familiaris*, and in certain species of birds, in which natural or artificial selection has brought about a diversity of races with greater differences in the physical characters—colour, form, and stature—than we find between the white man and the black. Science has as yet no infallible criterion by which it can distinguish races from species. The one test by which we can provide a secure foundation for this distinction is the fertility or infertility of the offspring which results from crossing the two species in question. If their progeny continue to reproduce in successive generations, the parents constitute a race. If, on the contrary, they prove sterile, the parents which were crossed must be considered species.

Admitting this principle, which seems to me sounder physiologically and more natural than any of the others, I have no difficulty in granting that the white man and the black man are merely two races, and not two distinct species. Every one is aware that the *metis*, who

come of the mating of the white and the black, remain fertile for many generations.

While, however, the whites and the blacks preserve their respective racial characters for an indefinite period—a quality which is known as their fixity—the *metis*, or half-breeds born of their intercourse, do not. They are not a real race, because many of their physical characters are not fixed, but tend to vary at each new crossing; sometimes they diverge toward the white type, sometimes toward the black. This innate tendency of the *metis*, depriving them of the characteristic qualities of a fixed race, has a considerable influence in the transformations that a mixed population must experience in the course of ages, when the mating of individuals is not subject to precise social rules, and the *metis* are quite free to mate with the whites, thus giving rise to offspring which diverges more and more, every time, from the black to the white type.

That is the actual condition of the mixed population of Brazil. The negro, an almost complete savage, bought in the African markets and transported to the Brazilian coast by Portuguese traders during the first half of the last century, arrived there in a state of the most abject brutality to which a race of men can fall. The adventurers who were then exploiting the fertile soil of Brazil treated them worse than domestic animals, and inflicted the most cruel and humiliating trials on them. During the voyage they shut them in the hold at the least sign of revolt, closed the hatches, and emptied sacks of lime in the close atmosphere. Some died of famine, others of thirst, and others were asphyxiated by the exhalations of the crowd, vitiating the air in which they lived. The Governments of several civilised nations stood out against this inhuman conduct, which did not press in the least on the conscience of the murderous traders. England, amongst other countries, was compelled to tolerate piracy in order to put an end to this disgraceful traffic.

Landed on the coast in the most sequestered and least accessible spots, these masses of human beings were divided into lots and sold to the owners of the estates, who did not scruple to separate wives from husbands, children from parents, according to the pleasure of the bidders. In this way, for the cultivation of the soil, the Portuguese introduced nearly two million blacks into Brazil. This unhealthy introduction of slaves has hampered the destiny of Brazil down to our own time, and has had disastrous moral consequences which only the slow action of time will wholly efface.

The negroes, as they arrived, were conveyed to the interior, where they died in large numbers after undergoing all kinds of misery. The most surprising feature of the situation is that the masters, with-

out the least delicacy, made concubines of their female slaves, and these unions of white and black naturally became very numerous.

In a very few years the districts surrounding the rural estates had a large population of *metis.* They shared the lot of their mothers, and remained under the yoke of their common master. As they were more active and intelligent than the blacks, they soon made their way into the homes and were occupied in domestic service. Many of them won the esteem of their masters and those about them. Some of them, giving proof of real intelligence and devotion to their employers, were, from a feeling of gratitude, emancipated by the latter, and were given the rudiments of an artistic education. In this way some of them became clever mechanics, carpenters, cabinet-makers, and even tailors. I have known personally an emancipated mulatto who had by his own ability obtained the diploma of a doctor of medicine, and was a credit to his profession throughout his life.

The progress of the *metis* up the social ladder, which began in the time of their slavery, has continued to our own time in accordance with the laws of intellectual selection. We must recognise the generous feelings of the majority of the Brazilian slave-owners. They showed a really Christian spirit in improving, as far as possible, the lot of the children of slaves born on their estates. How many times have we not seen masters who did not hesitate to bring their little mulatto slaves to the family table? They looked after their food and clothing, and treated them with kindness and gentleness when they were ill. The female mulattoes were often dressed in the fashion of the hour, wore jewellery, and, acting as maids of honour, they followed the master's daughters when they were out walking, going to church, or taking part in public festivals. It was no less uncommon at that time to see the master's son accompanied by a *metis* of the same age when he was out hunting or riding or going to the country balls, which were attended by people of every class. As a rule the slave-owners employed negresses or mulattoes to nurse their children. These fortunate women were emancipated as soon as their work was over, and nearly always continued to live in freedom under the same roof and have various privileges. The aged negroes were only employed in light occupations; during the remainder of their time they chatted with the master's young children, telling them odd stories that were calculated to strike the imagination.

The contact of the Portuguese and the negro in the regions of the New World assumed a character quite different from that of the Anglo-Saxons in contact with the same race. While the Portuguese did not hesitate to mix with the negro to the extent of begetting a mixed offspring, the Anglo-Saxon, more jealous of the purity of his

lineage, kept the negro at a distance, and merely used him as an instrument of toil. It is a curious and remarkable fact that neither the lapse of time nor any other factor has been able to alter this early attitude of the North Americans, who keep the black race separated from the white population down to our own days. Brazil acted differently. The whites there set up a race of *metis* that is scattered to-day over a vast extent of its territory.

Galton's deductions in regard to hybridity in animals cannot be wholly applied to human half-breeds. In the case of man there is an inheritance of moral and intellectual qualities that follows no fixed and absolute rules. Under the influence of agencies of which we do not know the nature, the intellectual qualities often reach, in the mixed progeny of the white and black, a degree of superiority which cannot be explained in terms of heredity, either remote or proximate. Some unknown force gives rise in them to an intelligence that is capable of developing to a pitch that neither of the parents could reach. It is, in fact, common to find, as the offspring of a white of very mediocre intelligence, mated with a negress of the lowest grade of culture, an individual of considerable intellectual power; just as if one of the effects of crossing in the case of man was precisely to improve the intelligence, or the moral and reflective qualities which distinguish individuals of the two races crossed.

Although it is impossible to say that the *metis* are models of beauty, either in their figure or contour, it is nevertheless quite true that, especially in the female sex, we meet types with graceful and well-proportioned figures. The voluptuous instincts are strongly developed in most of them, and may be traced in their languorous eyes, thick lips, indolent tone, and comparative slowness of speech. As a rule they are not muscular, and they seem to have little power of resisting disease. Tuberculosis, especially, claims many victims among them. They are habitually courageous, bold, intelligent, very talkative, and extremely imaginative. From the moral point of view, however, it must be acknowledged that it is not possible to place a blind confidence in their loyalty or their probity.

They have black or chestnut hair, inclining to redness at times; and it is almost always curly, very rarely straight. Their eyes are of chestnut-brown, sometimes a little greenish. Their teeth are less protruding and less regular than those of the black. In some of them the alveolar prognathism and the dark colouring of the Malpighian mucous layer are quite visible. Their complexion varies considerably, from a dark yellowish or olive to a dull white. They are usually dolichocephalic and platyrrhine; the cephalic and nasal index, however, vary over an extensive scale. As agricultural workers the *metis* are obviously inferior to the blacks, whose physical

robustness and muscular strength they have not inherited. They have scarcely shown any capacity for commercial or industrial life. As a rule, they squander what they have, are irresistibly fond of ostentation, are unpractical in their affairs, versatile, and intemperate in their enterprises. No one, however, can dispute that they are keenly intelligent and have a disposition for letters and science, and a fair political capacity. The *metis* of Brazil have given birth down to our own time to poets of no mean inspiration, painters, sculptors, distinguished musicians, magistrates, lawyers, eloquent orators, remarkable writers, medical men, and engineers, who have been unrivalled in their technical skill and professional ability. As politicians they are clever, insinuating, and very acute in profiting by any favourable opportunity to secure a position; they are usually energetic and courageous in the struggle, in which they use every weapon with equal zest.

From all this it is clear that, contrary to the opinion of many writers, the crossing of the black with the white does not generally produce offspring of an inferior intellectual quality; and if these half-breeds are not able to compete in other qualities with the stronger races of the Aryan stock, if they have not so pronounced an instinct of civilisation as the latter, it is none the less certain that we cannot place the *metis* at the level of really inferior races. They are physically and intellectually well above the level of the blacks, who were an ethnical element in their production.

The co-operation of the *metis* in the advance of Brazil is notorious and far from inconsiderable. They played the chief part during many years in Brazil in the campaign for the abolition of slavery. I could quote celebrated names of more than one of these *metis* who put themselves at the head of the literary movement. They fought with firmness and intrepidity in the Press and on the platform. They faced with courage the gravest perils to which they were exposed in their struggle against the powerful slave-owners, who had the protection of a conservative Government. They gave evidence of sentiments of patriotism, self-denial, and appreciation during the long campaign in Paraguay, fighting heroically at the boarding of the ships in the naval battle of Riachuelo and in the attacks on the Brazilian army, on numerous occasions in the course of this long South-American war. It was owing to their support that the Republic was erected on the ruins of the empire.

Prejudices of race and colour, which were never so firmly rooted in Brazil as one finds them in the population of North America, have lost much more of their strength since the Republic was proclaimed. As the new *régime* opened the door to all talent, many able mulattoes succeeded in gaining admission to the highest political offices in the

country. In the National Congress, the courts, higher education, the diplomatic world, and the highest branches of the administration, the mulattoes now occupy a prominent position. They have a great influence on the government of the country.

Marriages between *metis* and whites are no longer disdained as they formerly were, now that the high position of the mulatto and the proof of his moral qualities have led people to overlook the evident contrast of his physical characters, and his black origin is lost sight of in the approximation of his moral and intellectual qualities to those of the white.

The mulatto himself endeavours, by marriage, to bring back his descendants to the pure white type. Children of *metis* have been found, in the third generation, to present all the physical characters of the white race, although some of them retain a few traces of their black ancestry through the influence of atavism. The influence of sexual selection, however, tends to neutralise that of atavism, and removes from the descendants of the *metis* all the characteristic features of the black race. In virtue of this process of ethnic reduction, it is logical to expect that in the course of another century the *metis* will have disappeared from Brazil. This will coincide with the parallel extinction of the black race in our midst. When slavery was abolished, the black, left to himself, began to abandon the centres of civilisation. Exposed to all kinds of destructive agencies, and without sufficient resources to maintain themselves, the negroes are scattered over the thinly populated districts, and tend to disappear from our territory.

The mixed population of Brazil will, therefore, present a very different aspect in another century from that which it has to-day. The current of European immigration increasing every day, the white element of the population will after a time displace the elements which might retain any of the characters of the negro. Brazil will then become one of the chief centres of civilisation in the world. It will be the great market of the wealth of America, exploiting all its industries, enjoying every facility for transport in the conduct of foreign and intra-continental commerce, and filled with an active and enterprising population, which will occupy the large cities on the coast and then spread over the vast plains of the interior and along the winding rivers of South America.

"*Labor et Divitiæ*" is the motto carved over the gateway of the vast region of Brazil, in which there is room enough for all the races of the world to live in harmony and prosperity.

[*Paper submitted in French.*]